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History and Mysticism in Michel De Certeau

Edited by

Inigo Bocken



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PATRICK VANDERMEERSCH

FRAGMENTED CHRISTIANITY AND ELUSIVE MYSTICAL BODIES

On Michel de Certeau

When coherent worldviews collapse, one basic reality resists: the body. This is Peter Sloterdijk's hypothesis in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*.¹ The hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the work of Michel de Certeau, despite of the differences. Certeau deals with the collapse of a peculiar religious worldview and he does not point to a cynical, but to a mystical mind that is created by the resisting body. But what does this body exactly consist of? From the man who was one of the founding fathers of the 'École freudienne de Paris', one should expect both an analysis of a spiritual self, wrapped in a skin, and a discussion of how the conglomerate of organs, fluids and pulsions interact with the mystical experience of this self. However, the word 'body' may appear frequently in Certeau's work, one is astonished of its shallowness. Actually, the body seems to be reduced to the voice. Surely, the voice needs a body, but what is behind or deeper than the vibrations of air and the interpretation of it in the nearly immaterial structure of culture? One wonders why Certeau says so little about the real, carnal body. Is this not strange for a thinker so much involved both in psychoanalysis and in the basic religious idea of the word becoming flesh?

However, that could be only an impression. Let us therefore have a closer look to some basic texts stemming from the beginning of his work, and compare them with his final but unfinished book, *The Mystic Fable*.²

To be Faithful to the Tradition, the Present Should be 'Heretic'

Let us start with the text *L'Épreuve du Temps*, an article written for the special issue *Jésuites* of the review *Christus* in 1966. The original title was changed in *Le Mythe des Origines* when it was reprinted in *La Faiblesse de Croire* as Certeau had become aware that what he said was also relevant for the field of religion in general.³

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt a.M. 1983, translated as *Critique of cynical reason* (trans. Michael Eldred), Minneapolis 1986.

² Michel de Certeau, *La fable mystique*, Paris 1982; = *The mystic fable*, Chicago 1995.

³ Michel de Certeau, 'L'épreuve du temps', in: *Christus* 51 (1966), 311-332 = 'Le mythe d'origine', in: Idem; Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, Paris 1987, 53-74; pocket ed. Points, Paris 2003, 67-86.

The text stems from the very beginning of Certeau's intellectual career. We should not forget the peculiarities thereof. Differently from many others, he was not acquainted with the Jesuit tradition when he asked to become a member of the order. Certeau had first entered a diocesan seminar, as he wanted simply to become a priest. In 1950, he switched to the 'Society of Jesus', not for its peculiar spirituality but for the opportunity to be sent to China. But once he was a Jesuit, his superiors decided differently. He was put in charge of investigating the history of the Society that needed to go back to its roots. This was in line with the experience of the Catholic Church in general, which was in need for 'resourcement', as one used to say. And thus Michel de Certeau became a historian, but a historian being aware of the fact that historical research is always performed for the sake of the present.

The Jesuits had started 1954 to publish an own review of spirituality, *Christus*.⁴ In 1963 De Certeau became the assistant of the editor in chief, François Roustang, the later well-known psychoanalyst. The review became rather successful: 10.000 subscribers, the half of them from abroad. Initially it focused on publishing forgotten or not translated texts from the Jesuit tradition. Later on, it dealt more and more with general human experiences, religious experience being considered as one of them. Psychoanalysis became more and more the perspective.

In his article *L'Épreuve du Temps*, Certeau brings the basic question to the fore: What are we looking for when we feel ourselves compelled to go back to our founding fathers? For it makes no sense to exhume the initial rules for a Jesuit life, to recover them exactly as they have been put down in a particular time, a distinctive social context, a turning point in history, not to forget by the peculiar men involved in idiosyncratic intersubjective relations with each other. History goes on and one is compelled to adapt to other times, other situations, other views on religion. Can we however change anything? Don't we have an own identity to keep upright? Here we meet a frequently heard statement: we should keep the 'spirit' of a religion, a culture, a Jesuit Society. But 'the spirit', what does that mean?

At this point of his reasoning, Certeau makes a detour by looking at the accumulation of several biographies of Ignacio of Loyola, which, time and again, have pretended to give a 'better' presentation of Loyola's real life. Considered from our point of view, they were not better at all. The first one, that of Ribadeneira, still stands. Once we have become aware of this, we are tempted to stick at this one and try to grasp the Ignatian spirit there. Nevertheless, according to Certeau, in doing so we would miss the essential point.

For, even if they appear to be worse than the first one, we should not overlook the motivation that prompted to write the subsequent biographies. Obviously, at that time, there was already the need for re-interpretation, if not for

⁴ François Dosse, *Michel de Certeau: Le marcheur blessé*, Paris 2002, 74-89.

introducing changes, in order to remain Jesuits. The same need of resourcement, as experienced today, was already there: the need for change in order to remain faithful. Thus it would be an illusion willing to clutch at the true Ignacio as if he represented an absolute starting point. Ignacio is the dynamics made of him by his followers.

Trying nevertheless to grasp the real Ignacio, we find in his life and ideas a similar process going. The 'spirit' of the *Exercises* is a further elaboration of ideas on education of the University of Paris, which stem on their turn from Flemish and Rhenan ideas. Delving in history, we find time and again people like us, disputing and reinterpreting what earlier generations said before them. Certeau concludes:

In relation to our project of clutching at the Society at the very moment of its birth, the past appears to be simultaneously the place of birth and an abandoned place. We hope to find there, translucent in its origin, the initial *spirit* that further development would have counterfeited, but at the same time we reject the *language*, having become empty and wherein we could not live any more.⁵

These sentences could be understood as an injunction not to go back to the past and to stick at the present. But the text continues as follows:

When we investigate the origins in detail, the analysis seems not able to uncover more than a void where we had expected the truth. Nevertheless, it opens a path for us when it forces us to guess a complex system of human relations instead of the sacred object we had been looking for.⁶

The last words are essential. Otherwise you could simply say that it does not matter what choices a given group makes in a new context as long as it survives. The Jesuit 'company' – according to French terminology – should however not behave like those companies that became big by first selling shoes, subsequently food and finally wallpaper and computers while keeping the same name. There is what Certeau calls 'the resistance of the past'. The past resists to the present and the present to the past. Both are different but they cannot but refer to each other in being themselves. In the process of being part of a tradition, the present feels compelled to re-interpret the past, showing that it has been wrongly understood by one generation after the other. Meanwhile the past makes it manifest

⁵ 'Par rapport à notre projet d'aller saisir la Compagnie à sa naissance, le passé apparaît simultanément comme la terre natale et comme le pays déserté. Nous espérons y trouver, encore transparent dans ses origines, *l'esprit* qu'un développement aurait adultéré, mais nous en rejetons le *langage*, aujourd'hui désaffecté et qu'il ne nous est plus possible d'habiter', Certeau, 'L'épreuve du temps', 58, pocket ed., 71.

⁶ 'En scrutant de plus près les origines, l'analyse semble n'atteindre qu'un vide là où nous attendions la vérité. Mais elle nous ouvre au contraire une voie lorsqu'elle nous oblige à deviner tout un système de relations humaines, au lieu de l'objet sacré que nous cherchions', Ibid., 58, pocket ed., 72.

that it is still capable of holding grip on the present. Considered in this way, historical research is psychoanalysis of the present:

When it is read and re-read with others and before them, history becomes a psychoanalysis of the present. 'Primal scenes' emerge in the course of this current dialogue, and the latter changes the former when we become aware of the way a new risk has been conditioned.⁷

Thus there are two aspects of the past that need to be considered if we would like to stay in a 'tradition'. First, one should be aware of the complex interpersonal relations of people, present at different crucial moments when a tradition crystallises itself in something 'new' or changes direction. Second, one should keep in mind that in those cases a decision implies the will of the participants to take a 'risk'. In the same way we are conveyed to take a risk when we decide to take our own stay in a tradition and push it in a new direction.

The word 'risk' is obviously important for Certeau. It becomes a keyword in the final part of this text and the ground for an apology of 'heresy'. To be faithful to the past is grasping the aspect of risk that the preceding generations and the founding fathers have taken. We are deceived if we think that our task consists in a further elaboration or deployment of a momentum that starts in a certain point in history and has gone through various stages of elaboration. There is nothing Hegelian in Certeau's thought. A living tradition does not consist in continuity. Being faithful to a tradition is to become a faithful 'heretic'. A heretic is not someone who steps out of a tradition, but someone who takes the risk to make of a tradition something new. But in taking this risk, he or she should be aware of the way the past is still living in us. This is the necessary and true heretic dimension of dealing with the past. There exists however another form of heresy that Certeau condemns: the heresy of those believing that they can do without the past and do not question their roots.

But how are we entitled to take this risk? Certeau's answer is clear: due to our will. He clearly stays in the Jesuit tradition combating for the sake of the free will against Reformation. Thus we would expect a more detailed anthropology of the will, but this does not come. However, a next central word appears when Certeau asks the question how we can know we really belong to a particular tradition. The answer is: due to the 'body'. We should be part of the body of a tradition, the body of Christ. Here too, we would like some elaboration, as the metaphoric use of the word sometimes seems to refer explicitly to the primal experience of our physical body. We would expect a reference to the

⁷ "Toujours relue avec d'autres et devant eux, l'histoire devient une psychanalyse du présent: des "scènes primitives" resurgissent au cours de ce dialogue actuel, et celui-ci les change dans la mesure où nous découvrons le conditionnement d'un risque nouveau", *ibid.*, 64, pocket ed., 77.

construction of the Ego-ideal as Sigmund Freud described it in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. There belonging to a Church is explicitly taken into account.⁸ But we cannot but guess.

A last puzzling issue. In the text we just discussed, Certeau deals differently with the Jesuit and the Biblical tradition. In the first case, he insists on the fact that there is not really a fixed nucleus, that you just find different, often conflicting voices of people taking the risk of giving new impulses to what was handed down to them. They felt entitled to do so, for reasons further to be explored, as they experienced themselves as being part of the 'body' of that tradition. That seems to be Certeau's central intuition. However, the Christian tradition does not seem to function in the same way as the Jesuits's. The Biblical texts seem to address their readers more directly. Certeau's does not convey us to a reflection on the fact that the Church was born due to conflicts and agreement of a variety of so-called disciples of Jesus and that the Biblical texts reflect those conflicts, just as the biographies of Ignacio do. What was obvious to Certeau for the birth of the Jesuits, is not obvious to him for the birth of the Church. This becomes very clear in next text.

Looking for a New Body in a Fragmented Christianity

Following *Jésuites*, the next issue of the review *Christus* would be on the political life of Christians (*La Vie Politique des Chrétiens*).⁹ As one of the invited authors did not deliver his text in time, François Roustang filled the gap by writing a reflection on the second Vatican Council (1960-1964).¹⁰ He expressed his disappointment that the Council did not go far enough in the promised *Aggiornamento*, an opinion shared with many theologians in those days, and pointed then to a phenomenon that was hard to be accepted. Next to progressive and conservative people, who continued debating while remaining within the boundaries of the existing Church, a 'third man' had appeared. Although the possible reference to the movie of 1949 is tentative (perhaps: they are two groups quarrelling about the corpse of the Church), it is clear what Roustang meant: there was a group of believing Christians not interested in the Church as an institution any more. Those people dismissed their belief in the mediating function of the Church and looked for a direct access to Christianity. This phenomenon was especially triggered by the discourse of the magisterium on sexuality. Therefore it would be an illusion to think that the council had updated the Church and that things could now go on as before. People had found their freedom and

⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Group psychology and the analysis of the ego' (1921), in: James Strachey et al. (Eds.), *Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, London 1955, 56-144.

⁹ *Christus* 13/52 (1966).

¹⁰ François Roustang, 'Le troisième homme', in: *Christus* 13/52 (1966), 561-567.

from now on, we would have to deal with a radical split between faith in the Church and faith in God.

Roustang's text provoked such a tumult that he was fired as the editor of the review. For a year, Certeau continued as second editor next to the new editor in chief, Le Blond, a Jesuit coming from Rome. In 1967 he moved to a review with a broader cultural scope, *Études*. Certeau's trust in the Church as an institution had been shaken. Was there really still no freedom of speech in the Church? He was not the only disappointed one. Lots of theologians realised that the Second Vatican Council was resulting in a new deadlock in Church structures. The continuous and vivid process of *aggiornamento* they had hoped for, was dying.

May 1973 the well-known radio station 'France Culture' asked Certeau for a debate with Jean-Marie Domenach, the editor of *Esprit*, a review which was proud to voice a rather left-wing, independent Christian point of view. The topic was the future Church. Against all expectation, Certeau was the most critical of both. He asserted that Christianity had become fragmented: *un christianisme éclaté*. It did not consist in a coherent whole any more. Both debaters were asked for their texts in order to publish a common book,¹¹ but Certeau's text became so lengthy that only an abridged version of it could be published. The complete version came in print much later on, with a surprising new title. Instead of making reference to the fragmentation of the Church, the body was put to the fore: *From the Body unto Writing: A Christian Transit*.¹² Actually, the idea of a fragmented Christianity is still at the basis of the article, but one sees how Certeau is struggling with the question how Christian believers can find support in the 'body' of their tradition. For Certeau, the body becomes a central theme.

In this text he starts with the views we discussed already in *Le Mythe des Origines*, but he adds his new insights concerning fragmentation of a religious tradition. While the resourcement leading to historical research had its origin in a really existing and still living Jesuit society, this is not the case with Christianity as a whole. The Church considered as a living body does not exist any more. The coherent and all-including Christian world has disappeared. It has become fragmented and its parts live their own life:

Once the Church was organizing a ground, i.e. a formed soil. Both socially and culturally, the warranty was granted that we lived in the field of truth. (...) In the

¹¹ Michel de Certeau & Jean-Marie Domenach, *Le christianisme éclaté*, Paris 1974.

¹² Michel de Certeau, 'Du corps à l'écriture, un transit chrétien', in: Luce Giard (Ed.), *Michel de Certeau: La faiblesse de croire*, Paris 1987, 267-305 = 'The weakness of believing: From the body to writing, a Christian transit', in: Graham Ward (Ed.), *The Certeau reader*, Oxford 2000, 214-243. Notice that the main title of the English translation (*The Weakness of Believing*) was used in the French volume edited by Luce Giard only for the few pages specially written for the book with Domenach when the most lengthy version we deal with now, had to be abridged.

same way glorious ruins have been pillaged in order to use the stones for new buildings, Christianity has become today for our societies a provider of a vocabulary, of a thesaurus of symbols, signs and practices that are recycled elsewhere.¹³

For him this is a historical and sociological fact one cannot overlook. This leads to a fundamental question: what footing do we have, when we try to give voice to our own position in the history of Christianity?

Reading the subsequent pages, where Certeau develops his answer, one is struck by his constant use of the word 'body' in several denotations. As if he were conscious, from the beginning on, of the importance he will give to that word, he had started with a definition: 'By "body" I mean the historical and social existence [*être-là*] of an organized site'.¹⁴ But we see how the word goes its own way. For a long time, he says, understanding and interpreting Christianity presupposed 'the possibility of belonging to the ecclesial body which alone gives credence to a work of discourse of confronting the corpus of Christian rites and texts with contemporary practices'.¹⁵ But what can you do when this living body does not exist any more? You can try to bring that body anew into life, and this is frequently attempted to. Today, he says, theologians produce discourses on ecclesiology as they never did before. They insist e.g. on the importance of local Churches, of small communities of believers, but this Church is an imaginary body, not a real body, an all-including structure where daily life and religious experience make part of the same whole.

Certeau insists: we should definitely acknowledge that many parts of Christian culture have been disseminated in various parts of social life and are often not recognized as such any more. Trying to recover Christianity by introducing a Christian 'spirit' in secular practices does not undo the process of fragmentation. Nevertheless, this is mostly the way one tries to go. In their attempt to express their Christian identity, many believers put a certain emphasis on doing things better, with more application, with some 'excess'. They choose certain areas of social life to do things seriously. Although there is a real core of Christianity in this being attracted to do things better, the behaviour stemming from it does

¹³ 'Autrefois une Église organisait un sol, c'est-à-dire une terre constituée, on avait la garantie sociale et culturelle d'habiter le champ de vérité. (...) À présent, semblables à ces ruines majestueuses d'où l'on tire des pierres pour construire d'autres édifices, le christianisme est devenu pour nos sociétés le fournisseur d'un vocabulaire, d'un trésor de symboles, de signes et de pratiques réemployés ailleurs'. This quotation stems from these few pages especially written to summarise the part that was too lengthy to be published in the book resulting from the debate with Domenach and were separately reprinted: Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 299-305: here 299.

¹⁴ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 215 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 367, pocket ed., Paris 1987 (Seuil) 264.

¹⁵ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 215 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 268, pocket ed., Paris 1987, 264. Mind the fact that the italics in the original French stop after the word 'body': 'l'appartenance au corps ecclésial qui seul accrédite une oeuvre ou un discours de vérité'.

not re-establish a Church functioning as before, as a custody for an all-enclosing whole. Certeau gives the example of worker-priests (*prêtres-ouvriers*), in those days an important although controversial issue. It is clear that Christians and especially priests trying to deal with social problems were driven by real evangelical commitment. However, it was not really needed any more to be a Christian for doing what they did. Moreover, in their action, religion became a particular commitment for a particular social group, and did not stay as something universal. All those and similar attempts do not succeed in re-establishing a Church.

Discussing other examples, his conclusion is sharp: the Church is no living body any more. If we try to understand what biblical texts mean to us, we cannot interpret them relying on our experience of being members of the body of the Church:

For the ecclesial body no longer organizes operations which call themselves Christian, whether textual practices (readings of the Bible) or ethical conduct (sexual morality, for example). It is therefore no longer what animates discourses but rather the object, which these discourses represent. Hence the Church has ceased to be a site of production, becoming instead a product, an imaginary object of discourse. It would be easy to identify, in Christian language, the effects of this new economy that governs its production. The first signs to note are the changes occurring in the very representation of the body, social or individual: a reference all the more imaginary for being the more unitary. But I will retain only one point (albeit the essential one) concerning the possibility of constructing a language from an ecclesial site. This 'site' no longer functions as an institution, which founds a sense, capable of organizing a representation according to the limits of a body and hence supplying criteria for selection within evangelical strictures. On the contrary, it has transformed itself into an unlimited representation, indefinite. The Church, as an ideological object, can go wherever there is need and claim to fill all the voids in society.¹⁶

Nevertheless, there is something true in those attempts to save the spirit of Christianity despite the fragmentation of its body. There is the awareness that the core of Christianity consists in the experience of 'there is something more'. Certeau will say it repeatedly, without defining it really: we are prompted to 'excess'. But as it has become impossible to remain part of the body of the Church, which does not exist any more, another desire comes up and becomes irresistible: becoming part of the body of history. Although Certeau does not give much explanation for this statement, it seems to reflect something passionate for him. History makes you meet all kinds of people and in this way your identity changes. This can lead to an 'erotization of history' and even to becoming 'mad about loving'.¹⁷ This leads him straightaway to the importance of Christian texts wherein we can recognize this call to the 'excess'.

¹⁶ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 218 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 272-273, pocket ed., 268-269.

¹⁷ In French: 'Il peut y avoir une érotisation de l'histoire – une passion altérante et altérée, j'oserais dire: une rage d'aimer'. Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 229 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 292, pocket ed., 285.

At this point of his reasoning, we would expect Certeau repeating what he had said about the search for the 'real' founder of the Jesuits: that finally one has to accept that there is no fixed point. When you reach what seems to be the real beginning, you find in that time, just as today, a process of conflicting ideas, vulgar passions and quarrelling minds. You would expect Certeau pointing to the upcoming views on the complex origin of Christianity that became accepted by Catholic exegesis in those days, long time after the Protestant. Although they were very challenging, Certeau does not talk about them.

Let us remind a few data Certeau does not discuss. The eldest texts of the New Testament were not the gospels but the letters of Paul. Therein the author frankly says that he started to found 'Christian' churches without having known personally nor Jesus nor the apostles. Only after fourteen years he reached an agreement with the latter ones and both groups merged (Gal 1-2). As to the gospels, there were written much later, Marc being the first one (± 70), and Matthew and Luke adding material to it. As to John, his gospel presents a completely different life of Jesus. Moreover, there have been several other gospels, many of them reflecting a 'Gnostic' Christianity, which has perhaps been more important than the part that succeeded to become the only 'orthodox' one in the end. At the time Certeau wrote on the fragmentation of Christianity and on the 'call' nevertheless addressed by Biblical texts, it became clear that the origin of Christianity was to find in a swarming of religions and sects, mingling with each other. The texts did surely not simply address a call. They also made it manifest that Christianity had emerged bit by bit a something with its own contours out of a complex breeding.

One would expect Certeau discussing this multiplicity of often contradicting texts, whereby some were accepted and others rejected by what would become the official New Testament. Certeau does not. He takes exactly the opposite side from that advocated for the history of Jesuit order. In a text of the same year 1973 as the text on fragmented Christianity, he wrote on *The Misery of Theology* following:

Exegesis brings together *scientific* critique and the *Biblical* text (which already received priority, if it was not isolated, by all the reform movements since the 16th century). That encounter between the spirit of Modernity and the original language of the Christian spirit means first of all liberation. It is a marriage of contemporaneous science and the Evangelical origin. In doing so, exegesis bypasses mediation by the Church. Using the meaning the word has in chemistry, we could say that the discipline 'isolates' the relationship between a (sacred) *text* and a (learned) *reader*. At the end it produces just as a factory does it: it processes materials. However, in doing so, this exegesis destroys the principle that was within the Church's right: inserting a community in history. It does not take into account the social reality in which both private and public reading of the Bible is imbedded any more. The essence of Christianity belongs

to the *scholars* (the new clerics) and becomes a historical *object* (buried in documents of nearly two thousand years of age).¹⁸

This is a puzzling statement as it goes exactly in the opposite side of what he said in *Le Mythe des Origines*. In its wrestling with the original meaning of the texts, Biblical exegesis would put those texts at a distance, making of it an object with no relation to the subject. It would succeed in overcoming the 'resistance of the past', as he called it earlier. I wonder if that would be recognized by Biblical scholars and by the general public that became eager to hear more about the findings of historical and textual research. Certeau's statement not only contradicts his earlier views, but also the theories on readership that were in line with them and became widespread in those days. Communication theory and reader-response theories became popular and psychoanalytic interpretations of the Bible were discussed.¹⁹ Of course, he is perhaps not unaware of them and one could point to a possible influence of Roland Barthes and the latter's theory on the autonomy of the text. In any case, it is clear for him that the Bible, and religious texts in general, appeal directly to the reader, bypassing the process of positing oneself in the complex history of writings and religious structures.

We feel something of a passionate religion when Certeau takes this position. With some emphasis and antagonism, he opposes the current Biblical scholarship and 'our' (=Certeau's) exegesis, which is obviously different from the usual one.²⁰ Bit by bit, this exegesis becomes clear: the Bible is, just as other religious texts, a 'make-belief fable'. Those texts are not meant to give us information. They just are testimonies of all those men who have experienced the call not to stay at rest in a particular sociological or ecclesiastic situation but to strive for the 'excess' in the specificity of their individual life.

¹⁸ 'Elle [l'exégèse] conjugue la critique *scientifique* et le texte *biblique* (déjà privilégié, voire isolé, par tous les mouvements réformistes chrétiens depuis le XVI^e siècle). Cette rencontre directe entre l'esprit moderne et le langage primitif de l'esprit chrétien est d'abord une libération. C'est un mariage entre la science contemporaine et l'origine évangélique. De la sorte, l'exégèse court-circuite les médiations ecclésiales. Au sens chimique du mot, elle 'isole' le rapport entre un *texte* (sacré) et un *lecteur* (savant). Finalement ce qu'elle produit, c'est, comme dans une usine, ce qu'une pratique fait de son matériau. Mais, par là, cette exégèse détruit le principe que les Églises maintenaient en droit: une insertion collective dans l'histoire présente. Elle ne s'intéresse plus à la réalité sociale de la lecture actuelle, publique ou privée, de la Bible. L'essence du christianisme appartient à des *érudits* (nouveau clercs) et devient un *objet* historique (enterré dans des documents vieux de près de deux mille ans)'. Michel de Certeau, 'La misère de la théologie', in: Idem: *La faiblesse de croire*, 253-263: here 256-257, pocket ed., 251-259: here 254.

¹⁹ At this point we should mention the pioneering book of Norman Holland, *The dynamics of literary response*, New York 1968. Of course, it is unlikely that, in those days, Certeau was already acquainted with American literature, but Umberto Eco must have been known to him. For an introduction in psychoanalytic reading of the Bible, see: Rainer Kessler & Patrick Vandermeersch, *God, Biblical stories and psychoanalytical understanding*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001.

²⁰ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 232 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 296, pocket ed., 289.

Thus the core of Christian belief consists for Certeau in the experience of 'there is something more' but this experience is wrapped in the structure of a dialogue or, to be more concrete, of a call. However, the calling voice is not immediately present: we are carried by a history of answering voices having transmitted their belief in texts. The Biblical texts are part of them, but there are many others. Also in the case of Biblical texts, we do not meet a direct presence. In the first gospel, this of Marc, there is even no resurrection told. Jesus is dead and leaves us only his empty grave.

As to the message delivered by this chain of those echoing calls: the 'excess' as Certeau calls it, this experience of there being something more, asks today for marking our everyday life. Being not a living body any more, the Church is not the place where religion has to be incorporated. The religious call should be answered individually and, more precisely, by an act of the will:

What survives this progressive collapse of the 'body' – central problem for all present developments – is the formal relation between going beyond a situation and decision to 'do' faith. It is for the believer to take this on and fill it out with a 'content'. As the ecclesiastic 'body of senses' loses its effectivity, it is for Christians themselves to assure the articulation of this 'model' with actual situations.²¹

'To do faith' means for Certeau to write in his turn, testifying that his will has responded to the call transmitted by all those preceding texts, even if it is only 'a drop in the ocean'. He becomes very personal at the end. Referring to Lacanian theory that the most intimate question about someone's identity is deposited in his or her Christian name, he points to his own name: Michael, 'who is like God?' In this *nomen est omen* the call stemming from the unknown God is linked with the consciousness to be only a fortuitous human being.

A Word in Between

Looking back at those texts, we see that the search for the origin turned into the awareness of being part of a process of conflicting founders and transmitters. This does not mean we should accept with resignation our historical determination. On the contrary, the tradition we are part of incites our will to take the risk of making something new of it. This incitement is a call, a call proceeding more directly from the Biblical texts than from the historical analysis we use in the case of other institutions, that of the Jesuit order being Certeau's prime model. And the call is not directed to the intellect, but to the will. There is no Aquinas in Certeau. But the body too plays a part in this awareness of being called, although it is not clear how Certeau posits it. Is the body the place

²¹ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 226 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 287-288, pocket ed., 281.

wherein the will is experienced as something receiving the Christian call? You should assume it, but Certeau does not develop this aspect explicitly. Nevertheless, we cannot but observe the redundancy of the word 'body'. But what is this body?

Between the first texts on theology and Certeau's last book, *The Mystic Fable*, there is the lengthy interval wherein he left religious topics and dealt with seemingly different things: architecture, the planning of cities and the practice of everyday life. It would be interesting to see if and how his religious concern continues surreptitiously and especially how the body is involved in all the rituals of everyday life. You could also expect an elaboration of a *Philosophie de la Chair* in the line of the last and unfinished book of Maurice Merleau-Ponty²² completed with some notes on eroticism.²³ Certeau quotes Merleau-Ponty's book without going too deep in it,²⁴ and as a founding member of the 'École freudienne de Paris', he should be convinced of the importance of eroticism in every day life, even in that of religious people. Certeau seems not to have been attracted by this line of thought. When he writes about the overcrowded modern cities, he is especially struck by the fact that all those bodies can move through the streets avoiding touching each other.

A deeper analysis of Certeau's texts written in that period would perhaps shed more light on his conception of the body. Unfortunately, we have to forego the needed investigation for it. I can however not resist quoting a curious passage in his obituary for Jacques Lacan where Certeau deals in his own way with the emphasis put by Lacan on language. If Lacan is often criticized for the obscurity of his thought, he says, one should not overlook the peculiar way he spoke. Even restricted to his grunts and immoderate use of metaphors and figures of styles, Lacan gives us the example of the individual way we have to install the function of speech in a reluctant body. In this way, I would add, Lacan is nearly presented as a mystic:

This unfolding of the sound opens the field of paronomasias, alliterations, rimes and other poetic plays. It brings into the semantic organisation of discourse an oral transgression. This displaces or cuts the articulated meaning and makes the signifier autonomous in its relation to the signified. This flow of sounds pours in

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris 1964 = *The visible and the invisible*, Evanston 1968.

²³ In the period we are dealing with (1966-1974), Certeau could of course not have been influenced by Foucault's views on the historical determinations of sexual pleasure and the influence of the Catholic institution of confession on it: Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, Paris 1976, a book which is not the introduction to the following volumes (*L'usage des plaisirs*, Paris 1984 and *Le souci de soi*, Paris 1984) as it is suggested in many translations, the English included (*The history of sexuality*, vol. 1: *The Will to Knowledge*, London 1998). This book was indeed an introduction, but to a completely different series of studies focusing on the changes in sexual experience introduced in the 19th century.

²⁴ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 230 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 294, pocket ed., 287.

the syntactic landscape wherein it establishes diversions: a delight and a delirium of something unknown.²⁵

Certeau leaves us with a lot of questions on his conception of the body. What is it exactly? Is it just a metaphor for the needed limitation of a mass of flesh so that it could be recognized as something apart, bearing a name? Is it nothing but a metaphor whereby the primordial point of reference, a complex organisation of organs, fluids and drives, has faded away in the field of consciousness? Indeed, in Certeau's work the body seems to be very abstract. When he speaks of the 'erotization' of history, which is needed as an alternative basis for our personal voice after the lost body of the Church, this erotization is difficult to match with Freud's *Three Essays*. In my own research, driven by my own curiosity and my Christian body,²⁶ I have been fascinated by the history of Christian flagellants²⁷ and, recently, in writing a novel, by the peculiar clerical way of drinking wine. Could I get some help of Certeau's work in dealing with those topics? I am afraid, up to the point we came in our analysis, I have to say no. But let us jump to Certeau's final work.

Mystical Bodies Slip Sliding Away

The *Mystic Fable* opens with a promising introduction. Having said, not without some melancholy, that he is not personally involved in the mystical world, which is a radically past world and always exceeds the theoretical frameworks one tries to impose on it, he opens his analysis under following heading: 'an eroticism of the Body-God' (*Une érotique du Corps-Dieu*). At first sight, the statement issued there seems clear: mysticism appears in the West at the same time a new type of eroticism emerges, and this is not by coincidence. Both mysticism and eroticism try to provide an answer to a fundamental loss, the loss of a pre-existing order provided by God wherein everything got its fixed place.

According to Certeau, there have been two different ways of coping with this loss. The first one desperately looked for 'the only one', the unique love object that can fulfil all human desires. This was the way advocated by the new literature about love, the *amour courtois* especially. 'In place of the divine word (which

²⁵ 'Cette valorisation du son, clé de paronomases, allitérations, rimes et autres jeux poétiques, sème dans l'organisation sémantique du discours une transgression orale qui déplace ou coupe les sens articulés et autonomise le signifiant par rapport au signifié. Cette eau sonore se répand à travers le paysage syntaxique où elle insinue les dérives; délices et délires d'un insu'. Michel de Certeau, 'Lacan: une éthique de la parole' (1981), in: Idem, *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction*, Paris 1987, 168-196: 177.

²⁶ Patrick Vandermeersch, 'Un corps, catholique et orthodoxe', in: B. Verschaffel & M. Verminck (Eds.), *Orthodoxie (...) applaudissements*, Liège 1993, 39-55.

²⁷ Patrick Vandermeersch, *La chair de la Passion: Une histoire de foi: La flagellation*, Paris 2002.

also had physical nature and value), the loved body (which is no less spiritual and symbolic, in erotic practice) is substituted'.²⁸ We become eager to hear more about this particular process of transmutation, but the text continues by simply stating that this unique body, this all fulfilling love object, also disappears, just as God had withdrawn from the world. This sentence also stimulates our intellectual appetite, but we are perhaps too impatient. Continuing our close reading, we see Certeau introducing the other way of dealing with the fundamental loss. It consists in cultivating the experience of loss itself. According to Certeau, that is the way chosen by the mystics.

Then eroticism reappears in his description of this way:

It [the mystic configuration] carries to the point of radicalism the confrontation with the vanishing entity of the cosmos. It refuses to mourn it, at the time this seems acceptable to others, who think they could come to term with that loss. It accepts the challenge of the unique. Its literature, therefore, has all the traits of what it both opposes and posits. It is trial, by language, of the ambiguous passage from presence to absence. It bears witness to the slow transformation of the religious setting into an amorous one, or of faith into eroticism. It tells how a body, 'touched' by desire, and engraved, wounded, written by the other replaced the revelatory, didactic word.²⁹

Having re-emerged in those sentences, the theme of eroticism is nevertheless immediately dropped and Certeau continues by stressing again the experience of loss and absence, insisting that this is really at stake in emerging modernity. Surprisingly, at this point of his reasoning, he introduces psychoanalysis. The reader is eager to read more on eroticism. However, this theme does not show up. Stressing the parallel between psychoanalysis and mysticism, he points to the fact that both practices and discourses came up in a time wherein culture underwent a radical change and that they both made use of material taken from the elapsing world in order to subvert it from within. Just as mysticism used words taken from a past theology to make the end of this world manifest, psychoanalysis took up the presuppositions of the bourgeois society in order to undermine it. But no word is said about psychoanalysis in regard with its interest in elucidating hidden sex.

Thus it is for its cultural embeddedness that psychoanalysis is an eye opener for our understanding of the birth of mysticism in the 16th century. Certeau states explicitly that psychoanalysis gives us no tools for an understanding of the mystic's inner world and – we would add – its eroticism: 'Seventeen years of experience at the École freudienne de Paris have not produced a competency that it would suffice merely to "apply" to historical cases'.³⁰ This experience just

²⁸ Certeau, *The mystic fable*, 4 = *La fable mystique*, 13.

²⁹ Certeau, *The mystic fable*, 4-5 = *La fable mystique*, 13.

³⁰ Certeau, *The mystic fable*, 9 = *La fable mystique*, 18.

made him conscious of some theoretical issues. Which ones? The text keeps them wrapped in a *flou artistique*.

Remembering the context wherein Certeau's book came out (1982), one cannot but think of a book published a few years earlier, *Guilt and Desire* of Antoine Vergote,³¹ another theologian, also a member of the 'École freudienne de Paris' and Professor of Psychology of Religion in Louvain. This book deals extensively with the mystics' eroticism, Teresa's of Avila in particular. Of course, it is only my suspicion that Certeau's addresses in his text a hidden criticism to Vergote, whose book he must have known. In any case, it is curious that no reference is made to it, even not in order to criticize it, in the pages devoted to Teresa by Certeau.

In the further development of his text, the central idea is very clear. It deals with the function of speech. As long as people believed they lived in a well ordained universe, with laws reflecting God's will, words were supposed to point directly to the underlying things. The status of speech was not questioned. However, linked with the waning of this coherent world, the meaning of words became problematic. Thus we can understand the rise of Nominalism in philosophy and theology. In the same way we can understand the attention focusing on the act of speaking, on the effect of discourse and rhetoric. As it had become questionable if words immediately lead to their underlying signification, the action itself of using words became the scope of inquiry.

The rise of Western mysticism fits in this context. It has to be understood as a reaction against the fundamental loss of a coherent religious world. It acknowledges the fact that the absolute cannot be experienced as a presence in the created world and that a human being is radically confined in the limits of his speech that is an autonomous reality. However, it refuses to accept this loss as such. Using the act of speaking, it attempts to compel the absolute to be present. Nevertheless, the words mysticism hereby uses, are those of a past time.

Hence a frequent misunderstanding, according to Certeau. Mysticism is often understood as a clinging to the past, as a refusal to accept the disappearance of the old religious world. Actually, mystics still make use of the old religious terminology, but in a subversive way. They accept the new insights on the function of speech. They put the emphasis on the speaker and dismiss completely the old bond between the religious words they still use and the reality that was supposed to be immediately linked with them. Hence those silly utterances and strange reformulations of traditional theological discourse. One should however not oppose the discourse of the mystics and that of earlier theologians as if they were both relating in the same way to an underlying reality. The core is that mystics precisely do not debate on this reality, as they are convinced it is unknown.

³¹ Antoine Vergote, *Dette et désir: Deux axes chrétiens et la dérive pathologique*, Paris 1978 = *Guilt and desire: Religious attitudes and their pathological derivatives*, New Haven 1988.

They use the old words in order to bring the speaking person to the fore. The mere act of speaking, and not this of contemplating a supposed primal reality, leads to God. In addressing Him in a world deserted by Him, the mystic tries to compel God to be present in an interpersonal relationship. This can sound pretty coarse and does not fit for every mystic. But mostly they are convinced that the living relation with God takes place in a relationship of invocation and response.

Although this is the central idea, time and again sex re-emerges in Certeau's book as if it needed to be warded off. The most striking text part where it happens is the extensive and brilliant analysis of Jerome Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. According to Certeau, the painting seduces people to uncover all kinds of hidden meanings while its more profound message is that there is no such meaning. The painting is part of the same emerging Modernity as mysticism: it confronts the viewer with the disappearance of a sacred meaning inscribed in the order of things. Certeau does not make any attempt to analyse the erotic dimension of the picture. This is just mentioned.

And thus, wandering through his book, we see the erotic body often appearing but not regarded as carrying a peculiar meaning. The most astonished case is that of Teresa, whereby eroticism is mentioned but not analysed in depth.

Certeau must have been aware of it. In the last pages of his exposé he describes Jean Labadie wandering still further to the North and leaving time and again one congregation in search of another one. And suddenly, as if he woke up from a dream wherein he enjoyed to feel himself as a new Labadie and now realized that he had forgotten something urgent, he writes:

The task of isolation, from a particular life, the form of that experience that remains mystic, leads us to renew our enquiry on the status of the body, which is lacking here. We must, then, move through the *mystic* once more, no longer exploring the language it invents but the 'body' that speaks therein: the social (or political) body, the lived (erotic and/or pathological) body, the scriptural body (like a biblical tattoo), the narrative body (a tale of passion), the poetic body (the 'glorious body'). Inventions of the body for the Other.³²

And with tenderness and melancholy he decides: 'We must return to the "finite" place, the body, which *mystics* or the mystic "infinetizes", and let Labadie pass by – a man whose wanderings continue to elude the learned, who only see him cross the narrow field of their competency, and who, like Empedocles, leaves us nothing but his sandals.³³

The book ends with a mystical love poem of Catherine Pozzi and some pages clearly aimed at introducing the second volume of *The Mystic Fable*. They bear

³² Certeau, *The mystic fable*, 293 = *La fable mystique*, 405.

³³ Ibidem.

as title: *Overture to a Poetics of the Body*.³⁴ Alas, again, Certeau speaks on leaving, on the poignant experience that our home of a consistent religious world is not there any more and that wandering is the only possibility to cope with that loss. And here we have to leave him, regretting the second volume having never come into light. Like Labadie we saw him walking, Michel de Certeau, *Le marcheur blessé*, as François Dosse called him, and just as Empedocles he just left us his sandals.

Looking into the Vulcano

Trying to catch a last glimpse of him before he disappears in the smoky chimney of history, we remember a man who tried to find a way to God and Christian tradition after having lost trust in the Church as an institution. Luckily, he said, there are all those texts, reflecting the impact of the evangelical message, but one should not settle their message in a reproducible content. The gospels are fables, 'a convoy of representations',³⁵ and we cannot get take a grip on Jesus, this 'significant passer-by' (*ce passant considérable*).³⁶ Those echoing messages convey us to lead our life with 'excess', often to wander and appeal to the centre of our subjectivity, our will. But should we not delve deeper to see wherein our will is rooted? Like others in this time, e.g. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Serres,³⁷ Certeau experienced the bodily condition of his will and was, perhaps, attracted by a metaphysics of the body. Of course, voices are predominantly present in his work, but in those voices he discerns more and more that it is not the content of their message that matters, but the fact that they speak and insist themselves on their mere act of speaking. It were the silly utterances of the mystics or the grunts of Lacan, the sound of the voice leads to an underlying body, which is also an erotic body.

Belonging to a body, being a body oneself: time and again this problem reappears in Certeau's work. He admitted: he did not solve it and the book that should be devoted to it did not appear. We will not know how he did further intend his intellectual and religious journey. And, unlike Empedocles, we do not even have his sandals to get a smell of it.

³⁴ Certeau, *The mystic fable*, 295-299 = *La fable mystique*, 407-411.

³⁵ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 233 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 297, pocket ed., 290.

³⁶ Certeau, 'The weakness of believing', 237 = 'Du corps à l'écriture', 304, pocket ed., 297.

³⁷ Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens: Philosophie des corps mêlés*, Paris 1985.